



Weeden, P., Winter, J. C., Broadfoot, PM., Hinett, KV., McNess, EM., Tidmarsh, CR., Triggs, PA., & Wilmut, J. (1999). *The LEARN Project: Learners' Expectations of Assessment Requirements Nationally*. Qualifications and Curriculum Authority.

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# **University of Bristol Graduate School of Education**

## **CLIO Centre for Assessment Studies**

### **THE LEARN PROJECT**

#### **LEARNERS' EXPECTATIONS of ASSESSMENT REQUIREMENTS NATIONALLY**

#### **Report for the Qualifications and Curriculum Authority September 1999**

Paul Weeden and Jan Winter  
with

Professor Patricia Broadfoot, Dr Karen Hinett, Elizabeth McNess,  
Celia Tidmarsh, Pat Triggs and John Wilmut

**CLIO Centre for Assessment Studies,  
Graduate School of Education,  
University of Bristol  
35 Berkeley Square  
Bristol BS8 1JA**

**Tel: (0117) 928 9000**

**Fax: (0117) 925 1537**

**email: [jan.winter@bristol.ac.uk](mailto:jan.winter@bristol.ac.uk)**

**[p.weeden@bham.ac.uk](mailto:p.weeden@bham.ac.uk)**

## SYNOPSIS

*Over 200 students<sup>1</sup> of different ages (year 3 to year 13) were interviewed to gain insights into their perceptions of themselves as learners and their understanding of how they think they learn best. Learners' motivation was influenced by both intrinsic and extrinsic factors, but successful learners appeared to be more strategic in their approach. Most students had a good understanding of what they had to do for individual tasks but were less clear as to how these tasks fitted into the 'big picture' of the course. All learners were dependent on teacher set standards when assessing the quality of their work. There was little reported evidence of systematic self-assessment and few students recognised having the opportunity to develop their knowledge and understanding of this skill. Students largely equated assessment with summative assessment and there was evidence that the pressures of external tests were significantly different between year groups. The quality of feedback was commented on critically by many students. The usefulness of different types of feedback was discussed and students identified ways that they felt feedback helped improve their performance.*

## AIM

The overall aim of this project was to contribute to QCA's second general aim of raising standards of attainment.

The particular aim of this research was to find out how students understand the purpose, requirements and assessment of the courses they follow and how they think they learn best.

### Specific objectives:

By working directly with students the research sought

- to establish what was being *learned* rather than what was being *taught*.
- to establish how far students understood what was required of them when they studied their subjects
- to establish how far students were able to evaluate their own performance
- to explore how best to provide feedback which helps students to 'close the gap' between current performance and the standard required.

## BACKGROUND

A key policy issue being addressed by this research is the mechanism for raising standards. The standards agenda has been a dominant theme in English education for many years but over the last ten to fifteen years the emphasis has increasingly been on using assessment and accountability mechanisms to drive up standards. The TGAT report (1988) suggested that National Curriculum assessment could serve a range of formative, summative and accountability functions. In practice most emphasis has been placed on the summative and accountability mechanisms. The focus on summative end of key stage standard tests and improving standards by external mechanisms such as the publication of comparative school 'league tables' and more recently target setting for schools and LEAs has to some extent neglected the individual classroom and the relationship between teacher and learner.

When the British Educational Research Association Assessment Policy Task Group, now relaunched as the Assessment Reform Group, invited Professor Paul Black and Dr Dylan Wiliam to undertake a major review of the research literature pertaining to assessment and learning, their goal was to demonstrate to policy makers and practitioners the key central link between assessment and learning. Black and Wiliam's (1998) review provides powerful evidence of the capacity of assessment to raise standards where students have a clear sense of themselves as learners, the goals they are trying to

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<sup>1</sup> The term student is used to refer to learners of all ages in this study

achieve and how to reach them. They suggest that “In terms of systems engineering, present policy seems to treat the classroom as a black box” and plays down the crucial role of the relationship between teacher and learner in raising standards.

The LEARN project therefore gives a snapshot of students’ views on the situation inside that black box in England during late 1998 and early 1999. The research was undertaken by a team of researchers from the CLIO Centre for Assessment Studies at the Graduate School of Education at the University of Bristol. The research team interviewed students in years 3, 6, 9 and students studying GCSE English, mathematics and science; Intermediate and Advanced GNVQ and GCE A-level.

This report does not attempt to quantify more or less successful strategies used by schools or learners. We are reporting students’ perceptions of what helps them learn – the child’s voice that is often ignored in the standards debate. Through talking to students we have attempted to get an insight into their perceptions of assessment and learning and this report describes our main findings.

## METHODOLOGY

The team of researchers had considerable previous experience of interviewing learners through projects such as PACE, ENCOMPASS and SAPHE. The short time scale available to conduct the research necessitated methodologies that would give a snapshot of the situation at the time rather than an ongoing in-depth picture of learners over time. A note of caution is necessary. The interviews were mostly conducted in the spring term (January to March 1999). This may under-emphasise students’ perceptions of the importance of external tests since these are largely timetabled for later in the year (May/June).

A semi-structured interview schedule was written, trialled in three schools during November / December 1998 and modified in the light of that experience. The revised schedule (Appendix 1) which was used for the rest of the interviews was structured in such a way that the four target areas, Learners, Expectations, Self-assessment and Feedback could be easily identified and analysed by the research team.

The schools and colleges involved in the study were all located in the South West of England but sampled the range of institution contexts in England. Institution locations included inner city, suburb, small town and village while school size varied from less than a hundred to more than fifteen hundred students. In total twenty institutions were involved and more than two hundred students interviewed.

In each institution, for each year group interviewed, teachers were asked to identify a group of six students from across the ability range. This group was interviewed together at the beginning of the day so that they were familiar with the researcher and had the opportunity to gain some understanding of the purpose of the research. The researcher then interviewed each individual student for approximately half an hour. The researcher made notes on the schedule forms and taped the interview.

Students were asked to bring with them to the interview examples of recent work, both assessed and not assessed. This work was used to explore students’ understanding of tasks and the criteria used to assess them. Prompt cards (Appendix 2) were also used to explore students’ perceptions of learning and methods of assessment.

The schedule was designed to encourage students to reveal their thinking about assessment and to enable the researchers to analyse the data quickly. As a triangulation exercise teachers were also interviewed and institutions were invited to give the researchers documentation about institutional and departmental assessment policies and procedures.

Throughout the data collection and analysis period there were regular meetings between the team and the responsible QCA officer which informed progress. Following the interviews, the researchers

produced a brief summary of the main findings for each year group in each school.. The tapes were used to identify relevant quotes which were then transcribed. The data for each year group was then analysed for similarities and differences and the whole research team identified and discussed the emerging themes. These themes form the basis of this report and are illustrated by exemplars and quotes from the interviews.

## RESULTS

**In this section of the report the main findings are outlined, supported by relevant quotes from students.**

### **A. LEARNERS** - *a commentary on learners' attitudes, aspirations and views on learning*

This section focuses on students' attitudes to school and learning, in two areas: our analysis of the factors affecting students' motivation and their perceptions of the reasons for success at school.

#### **1. Motivation**

##### **a) Enthusiasm for school:**

This was strong for year 3 and 6 students, with a positive attitude shown to work. For lower attainers there was a tendency for the social aspects to be emphasised over the learning. School was 'fun' for these students.

*Everything's hard and easy - things aren't meant to be easy as you get older.(Y3)*

*Sometimes it's fun, reading is boring.(Y3)*

*If I don't work my friends will get ahead so I work even if I'm not in a good mood.(Y3)*

*I works really hard - cos I wants to do good (Y6)*

By year 9 enthusiasm for school was not evident - more an acceptance of it. Differences were emerging between higher and lower attaining schools as well as individual students. In higher attaining schools there was a more positive attitude.

*I enjoy school - it's a chance to meet my friends.(Y9)*

*In year 9 it was uncool to work hard - now it's okay.(Y9)*

*I don't work hard in the hard subjects and in the easy subjects I just relax and do more work(Y9)*

*If it's a subject I really enjoy then I'll work harder.(Y9)*

Amongst GCSE students a stronger focus on working towards examinations and future prospects had appeared and this refocused students on school.

*I think I've started well this year - I've put more into it than I usually would because it seems more important.(Y10)*

*In year 9 it was a bit laid back. In year 10 it's more stress and you do more. In a way they're saying you've got to get down to it or you won't get the grades you want for your job.(Y10)*

*This year, if you miss lots of school it's going to really hinder your education to get through your exams.(Y10)*

*I always try to do my best - you've got no choice really. You've got to do your best or you just won't get a job. If I had a choice I'd rather not do it.(Y10)*

Post 16 students, both GNVQ and A level, had positive attitudes to school. They had made a choice and were showing responsible attitudes for taking responsibility for their learning. Some GNVQ students showed signs of feeling like 'second class citizens' compared to their A level colleagues.

*I think I work hard. If I didn't enjoy it I wouldn't be trying so hard. (GNVQ)*

*Sometimes I do more work than I used to because I actually want to do it.(GNVQ)*

*I want to get to where I want to be in ten years time so I see getting good A level results and a good degree as part of that. (A level)*  
*I'm specialising a lot more so it's a lot more work for each subject. (A level)*

### **b) Subjects and teaching:**

In year 3 there was a strong message of students' learning being fun and of teachers creating a positive atmosphere of achievement. This was also true in year 6 although it was combined with a stronger sense of students recognising the value of the work they were doing for their futures.

*It's not fair for me - they give me hard work, not easy. They should give me quite hard/quite easy work. (Y3)*

*I don't try in boring subjects, maths cos 20 sums all about the same thing. (Y6)*

*Depends on the work I do - if I enjoy it and I'm good at it - I do a lot better. (Y6)*

By year 9 there were more comments about some subjects being 'boring'; lower attainers in particular were strongly affected by their views of both the subject and the teacher in terms of their commitment to their work. Higher attaining schools had begun to instil in their students a sense of urgency about their GCSE courses, i.e. looking forward towards year 10 (see Y9 comment above linked to this).

*German - I try my best but it's just not good enough. At least, I used to try my best, now I don't bother. (Y9)*

*In maths I try harder because I know I need to do well in it. In German I've sort of given up. (Y9)*

*The kind of teacher you have makes a difference and if you get on with them. (Y9)*

*It depends what sort of subject I'm in. If I'm in a subject I really enjoy then I'll work harder. (Y9)*

*(I don't try hard) if I don't like the teachers or if they're boring lessons (Y9)*

*You need a lot of qualifications. History, probably English, Maths. I need to have all the basic ones. I want to go to college. (Y9)*

Many students had developed a more responsible attitude to their work by year 10 and there was a marked motivational effect of having chosen some of their subjects. These choices had been made partly for enjoyment and partly, in quite a general way, for future career choices.

*Some subjects involve more work than I thought they would. (Y10)*

*I chose them because I enjoy them - and Engineering because I need it to get the job I want. (Y10)*

*I think the more grades you get above grade C then the more options you've got. (Y10)*

*I think IT is very important; geography and drama I do because I enjoy. (Y10)*

GNVQ students were well motivated by their courses, again through having made deliberate choices which they were taking responsibility for.

*I did the GNVQ intermediate and loved every minute of it. So now I'm doing the advanced course - it's excellent, really good. (GNVQ)*

*Sometimes I do more work than I used to because I actually want to do it. (GNVQ)*

A level students all enjoyed their subjects but some complained that every teacher thought their subject was the most important and did not notice the effect this had on students.

*Each teacher thinks their subject is the only one you're doing and you should be 100% in the subject all the time and they don't realise you're doing 2 other A levels and work outside school. (A level)*

### **c) Aspirations for future:**

These changed as students grew older, year 3 and 6 students having quite clear ideas about their futures but perhaps not being as realistic as older students. Some students in year 9 were not clear

about their aspirations, particularly lower attainers, who could perhaps see limitations appearing as a consequence of their achievement levels. Students in lower attaining schools (in more deprived areas) generally had low aspirations and self esteem. These factors also applied to lower attainers on GCSE courses.

*I want to be a vet, a nurse or a singer. When I play I might play vets. (Y3)*

*A teacher. You need to know the maths to teach the children when you're a teacher. If you don't want to be a teacher and you want to go to the moon, you can learn about gravity and things like that. (Y3)*

*A cartoonist. I draw lots of cartoons in my work. (Y3)*

*I want to be a mechanic. They're learning me to... I do circuits and I could do that in a car (Y6)*

*I want to be an MI5 agent or something to do with computers. School is useful because you need to know a lot. I do computer work at home mostly. (Y6)*

*School work is pretty important - you have to know a lot of subjects if you want to be a teacher. (Y9)*

*Science, English and maths are most important - all jobs use a bit of that. (Y9)*

*I want to be an architect and go to college. I need my Art and my English and Maths, because you've got to work out points and stuff. (Y9)*

*I want to work on a cruise ship. My mum says she can get me bar work when I'm 15, cleaning tables. When I'm old enough to serve drinks she can get me a job doing that. (Y9)*

*If I want to be a model none of it will be important (Y9)*

*I want to be a midwife - we don't do nothing on babies. Science has got a lot to do with it but not a lot. (Y10)*

Higher attaining students on GCSE courses were more focused on their futures, often with clear ideas about courses or jobs they intended to go on to post 16.

*I'd like to be a chartered engineer - there's lots of directions I could go. I think the more grades you get above C grade then the more options you have. I think maths, English and science cover a lot of the job aspects. (Y10)*

*Languages could be important if you want to go abroad and get a higher job. (Y10)*

*I chose business studies because it's good to know about business when you work in computers. (Y10)*

GNVQ students often had clearer ideas about their future plans than A level students. The strong vocational focus of the GNVQ work helped to reinforce students' ideas while A levels left students with a more open agenda.

*I'd like to do entertainment at Pontins or somewhere like that. I've got work experience planned out there. (GNVQ)*

*I wouldn't mind working with computers - there's quite a few sides to it. I think I'd prefer building them. (GNVQ)*

*I want to be where I want to be in ten years time so I see getting good A level results and a good degree as part of that. (A level)*

*I wanted to have A levels so I can get into University if I want to. (A level)*

*I'd like to work with business, maybe figures. I chose my A levels on the basis ones I was good at, ones I was interested in and ones I could maybe make a career out of. (A level)*

#### **d) Short term goals:**

As well as the longer term goals described above, short term goals were important in motivating many students. At year 3 this might have been to do with keeping up with friends or not staying in at

lunch time. In year 6 the KS2 tests were a factor for many students. Lower attainers in year 9 were in some cases quite inward looking and had few goals - affective factors were very important here - 'moods' and teachers making work interesting. Other year 9 students had some awareness of KS3 tests but did not seem to be particularly concerned to work towards them.

*If I don't work my friends will get ahead so I work even if I'm not in a good mood. (Y3)*  
*Everyone's getting better - everyone in green is now in blue. If they all tried really hard there'd be just one group and we wouldn't have to have groups any more. (Y3)*

*SATs are going to be hard - no play (Y6)*  
*I'm trying to work hard to get into the top set (Y6)*

*It depends what sort of subject I'm in. If I'm in a subject I really enjoy then I'll work harder. (Y9)*  
*Most of the time I do my best but sometimes I get tired and I get in a ratty mood. (Y9)*

For students in examination groups, GCSE, GNVQ and A level, there were short term goals built in to the structure which helped guide them, but the longer term goals of examination success were strong.

*I've organised myself more and set my mind on certain things - make sure coursework and homework come first. It's only a few years you've got to knuckle down and then you've left school and you can decide what way you want to go. (Y10)*  
*We have a date of completion of the whole task and within the task we set deadlines for parts of the task. (GNVQ)*

*My Geography work is modular so I have to look back - I have an exam in the summer. (A level)*  
*I have lots of lists of things to do - planning and discipline to get things done. I find it really hard - I have to reward myself! (A level)*  
*I think it all builds up - GCSE, A levels, degree, career. (A level)*

## 2. Reasons for success

The three factors identified here by students were effort, ability and opportunity to learn.

Younger students were more likely to attribute success to effort and opportunity and made little mention of some students being intrinsically more able to achieve than others. Only a few higher attaining students in years 3 and 6 mentioned ability as a factor while in year 9 and later it was more likely to be lower attainers who mentioned ability as a factor. Throughout the years up to year 11 'working hard' was seen as the most important factor in achieving success. Post 16 students had the most balanced view, attributing success to a mixture of the two factors of effort and ability.

*People are different - everyone's good at something. (Y3)*

*Because they muck about and just be stupid (Y6)*  
*They listen and work hard (Y6)*  
*Because some people are better at some things - I don't know why (Y6)*  
*Some have read more books (Y6)*  
*Done work before so they know more (Y6)*

*It's just genetics (Y9)*  
*People who talk too much and interrupt and get into trouble, they don't do as well (Y9)*  
*Cos they're brainier and they work harder (Y9)*

*I think if you're more confident in yourself you do better. (Y10)*  
*Some people are naturally better at English and things than others. (Y10)*  
*Some people can just come in and get on with it. Sometimes the teachers don't like you whatever you do. (Y10)*



*Boys don't do well because they mess around. (Y10)*

*Some people put the effort in. Sometimes it counts if you really enjoy the work. (GNVQ)*

*Some people mess around and don't bother to do the work. (GNVQ)*

*I do think you have pupils who are more gifted than others. (A level)*

*Effort, concentration, intelligence, peer pressure, influence from teacher. I think you get on better if you get on with the teacher. (A level)*

The answers given by students to the prompt cards also give insight into the way their learning strategies develop (see Appendix 2). Older students were more likely to say they learn best when given a challenge and when they start to think about what others say.

## **B. EXPECTATIONS - Learners' understanding of what is expected. How far do they understand what they are required to learn?**

We focus here on two themes - students' dependency on teachers and their understanding of the criteria for 'good work'.

### **1. Dependency:**

A clear dependence on teachers has emerged. Throughout students had a good surface understanding of individual tasks, but little sense of the purpose of the task - they do what the teacher tells them to. From year 3 teachers are in control and direct the activity - in year 6 there is some evidence that higher attaining students were more likely to be autonomous if given the opportunity. Lower attainers were more reliant on teachers and more likely to be confused. It was however apparent that young students who were dependent at school were able to be more autonomous at home.

*Smiley faces are for working hard, neat handwriting, spelling the date right.(Y3)*

*I don't really like topics - you don't really understand and you have to do it the next day and the next day.(Y3)*

*Miss wrote on board and we copied it down and then had questions to answer (Y6)*

By year 9 the introduction of coursework was confusing some students and it tended to be closely defined with little pupil autonomy.

*She'd give us a booklet which tells us what we'll do. It's got marks for each bit. (Y9)*

*I try and get it neat with no gaps in - in case you wanted to give it to someone. The teacher said try and get no gaps in it. (Y9)*

*It's half of me doing what I want to do on it and half the teacher. (Y9)*

At GCSE level there was evidence that there was a split between the information given to students. Higher attainers were allowed to be more autonomous while lower attainers were not told so much (thereby being kept more dependent on their teachers).

*We don't know how it'll be assessed but we know what to do - they give us sheets and stuff. (Y10)*

*If it said to get level 7 do extension work, it would make you go and do the extension work. It saves time - you feel more independent on yourself. (Y10)*

*I like it because you just go into a lesson and you know what you've got to do and you just get on with it without the teacher talking to you. (Y10)*

*When we work on coursework the teacher says we should look through it and see what's right.*

*But sometimes I don't know what to do. (Y10)*

*In English we get a coursework plan saying generally what we've got to include. (Y10)*

At GNVQ the specifications of individual tasks were clearly understood, but students didn't necessarily have the 'big picture'. At A-level students still preferred to ask 'the oracle' (the teacher) rather than friends if they didn't understand.

*Task sheets refer to part of the specification and outline what has to be done. (GNVQ)*

*Maths is causing the most problems but just go and see the teacher. Its mostly the way the tasks are phrased - I can do them as soon as I understand them. (A level)*

## 2. Criteria for 'good work':

Overall there was some evidence that assessment and feedback tend to focus on and reward more limited assessment criteria. There is evidence of progression of understanding of criteria through the year groups but the most frequently mentioned throughout are effort, presentation and accuracy. Year 3 students mentioned trying hard, being neat and accurate; by year 6 this had extended to good handwriting, spelling, punctuation and showing working (in maths). They were aware that there were different criteria for different subjects and there was clear evidence about teachers emphasising certain aspects - metaphors, adjectives, structure (in reports of science investigations - introductions and conclusions).

*No-one thinks much of scribble or big writing.(Y3)*

*It's one of my best because my handwriting is joined up neat.(Y3)*

*Smiley faces are for working hard, neat handwriting, spelling the date right.(Y3)*

*My writing was good, most of it was joined up. (Y6)*

This was continued in year 9 where good spelling was mentioned along with comments about getting stories in the right order so they are understood.

*Most of my teachers say I could improve on my presentation. It's not very helpful because they've said it so many times.(Y9)*

*They're looking for if you've put quite a bit of effort into it and time. (Y9)*

At GCSE the effort, presentation and accuracy were still mentioned but there was a clearer understanding that there were significant variations between teachers and subjects. English requires imagination while maths needs working to be shown! Planning, method and technical aspects were also identified.

*Yes, I think I asked the right kind of questions but when I wrote the bit about it at the end I think I could of done more detail - put more things in what I did. (Y10)*

*Usually I know if it's good by how much time I've spent on it. (Y10)*

*We did a story and Miss said it was very good - my punctuation and paragraphs. (Y10)*

*What they look for is understanding information. (Y10)*

At GNVQ effort was still important but students were also clear about the meaning of each performance criterion, range statement or evidence requirement. They seemed less clear about the 'big picture', how they were doing in relation to achieving a pass, merit or distinction. At A-level some have a much clearer idea of the criteria focusing on structure and content.

*I'm unsure about how I'm doing in relation to pass, merit or distinction. (GNVQ)*

*Mostly on style, the amount of points, how you've expressed those points and how you've given your point of view towards those points (A level)*

## C. SELF ASSESSMENT - Learners' ability to evaluate their own performance

Throughout all interviews there was little evidence of self assessment being used as a strategy to support learning. By self assessment we mean more than simply students marking their own or peers' work; we mean an engagement with the quality of their work in order to reflect on how to improve it. However students did show some competence in self assessment despite this lack of focus in it in their teaching.

Very few mentions were made of self assessment before the examination course years of GCSE. In years 3, 6 and 9 students referred to marking their own work and marking peers' work. This rarely amounted to more than a mechanical marking process but there were rare mentions of some peer assessment, particularly in English.

*Once we swapped with a friend - not in this class. (Y3)*

*In my head. Once in maths I ticked my own work. It's not good to mark your own work because you don't know if it's right or wrong. (Y3)*

*Sometimes in the whole class - he does it on the board and we mark our own. (Y6)*

*I do a piece of work and compare it later with work I'm doing now and see the improvement. (Y6)*

*Sometimes in Maths Miss puts up answers. (Y6)*

*Sometimes we swap books with our neighbours and see what we've got wrong. If we've got any spelling mistakes they underline it and we check it again. Then I've got two opinions on it. (Y9)*

*In English we have a partner and you swap books and you assess them and the teacher takes them in. I don't like that really. It's better if the teacher does it really. (Y9)*

*Sometimes we think about how we could have done better and how we could have improved it.*

*Usually happens mostly in English and written subjects - not maths. (Y9)*

With older students there were a few more instances of peer assessment being used to develop learning - to share ideas, for example. At GCSE level some uses of coursework criteria encouraged students to evaluate and improve their work in order to meet criteria for higher levels. This was more common amongst higher attainers.

*Just before Christmas we gave each lesson the number we thought and the teacher did the same.*

*Most of the grades I gave were the same as the teacher. (Y10)*

*In Geography we had an essay and he said try to pick out the mistakes and give it a mark out of twenty. It was good to see what kind of mistakes we make. (Y10)*

*We sometimes assess our own work in Science - it's a waste of time. (Y10)*

*No - sometimes I wish we did. Sometimes I feel I've done a really good bit of work and I'd like to say so. (GNVQ)*

*We swap things - check tests (A level)*

*Sometimes. Very rarely though (A level)*

*We assess each other's. We go through, mark and make suggestions how they could improve. You get other people's opinions as well as the teacher's and not just your own. (A level)*

Students did, despite this, show some degree of skill at self assessment at all levels. Year 3 and 6 students were able to evaluate their own work, often by comparison with previous pieces of work and always with reference to teacher validation of their views - if the teacher said one piece of work was good they would compare another piece to it. This is linked to the teacher dependency mentioned before in connection with identifying 'good' work and seemed to lead to a rather surface understanding of the purpose and value of work done.

*He wrote on it so it must be good. (Y3)*

*I usually know inside me if the work I've done is good. (Y3)*

*I didn't think he would like it, but he liked it (Y6)*

*A tick means he probably likes it (Y6)*

*Mr L tells us if its good (Y6)*

*I know before with English whether its good - not so easy with maths and science (Y6)*

*We don't know what we've got until she shows us. (Y9)*

*Sometimes I write down the mark I think I'm going to get. I'm not usually right - I put down Bs or Cs and the teacher gives me A or B. (Y9)*

*I suppose it's good - I got A4 for it. (Y9)*

*One time I did an essay and I didn't think I did it very well but he gave me A1. I didn't think I'd written enough but he just said very good. (Y9)*

Older students showed a similar tendency to make judgements in relation to previous work and teacher set standards. They also used, as mentioned above, GCSE, GNVQ and A level criteria to evaluate work with an increasingly deep understanding. Even at these levels, though, self assessment was almost never a part of the learning process.

*I thought it was good because the teacher told me when she gave the book back. (Y10)*

*Sometimes I thought I did really bad and then I got a good mark - and sometimes it's the other way round. (Y10)*

*I usually never know until I get the mark. We've only just started doing travel writing so it was new to us. I could improve on it now. (GNVQ)*

*I thought I'd got a merit on my planning but now I understand why I didn't. (GNVQ)*

*I couldn't predict exactly - a lot of the time I underestimate how well I've done - probably not wanting to disappoint myself. (A level)*

*I was a bit worried that it wasn't going to be a good piece of work - but I think I always am when I give pieces in. I was pleased she thought it was good as well. (A level)*

Students did not value self assessment, with only 6% overall choosing this prompt card (see Appendix 2).

## **D. FEEDBACK:** *Learners' understanding and use of feedback (how is it best provided?)*

### **a) Types of feedback:**

Students had feedback in the form of grades, ticks, smiley faces, written and oral comments. Throughout the age groups there was evidence of some confusion between feedback on effort and achievement.

*If there's a star in pen that miss wrote, then you have to write it three times - that's the boringest part. (Y3)*

*If it's a tick I'm quite happy because it means its good work, but if it's 2 sentences at the bottom it means it's quite bad. (Y6)*

*A star means a sticker - makes me feel that the work is good and neat. (Y6)*

*Some teachers put things you could work on to make it better. I like that cos you can work on it more. (Y9)*

*What the teacher says is most important because it's one on one so they can tell you what they really think. (Y9)*

*If it's like a C or a D you know to work harder and revise more. Sometimes comments are useful, sometimes not. (Y9)*

*They usually say how well you researched and how you didn't put in enough effort. They give you positive feedback as well. They give you tips on how you could improve. (Y9)*

*Sometimes in English I get B - it means good. She writes 'good work' or 'well done'. (Y9)*

*If we don't understand things they get explained to us. If it's just written you can't ask a question directly. If you talk you can say how can I improve it. (Y10)*

*Comments make you think about the other things you've got to put in next time to get a better grade - it's good to know what you've done wrong. (Y10)*

*If they correct spelling I can sort it out. If they left them I wouldn't know how to spell the word. (Y10)*

*I think the feedback is really useful - it's helped me improve my grades. (GNVQ)*

*In short pieces of work it's usually a comment like 'well done'. (A level)*

*We get a mark, comments all the way through, spelling, key words I've missed out and then a comment at the end on how to improve the work. (A level)*

*We get post mortems from the teacher after tests. And after essays. (A level)*

The type of feedback valued by students was indicated by their responses to the prompt cards (see Appendix 2). There was a clear increase among older students in the percentages choosing 'feedback which suggests how I can improve my work' and 'understanding how my work will be assessed'.

### **b) Understanding grades:**

Students did not necessarily know what grades meant or were for (even at A-level) and there was variation in application between different subjects and teachers, particularly in secondary schools. There was evidence of discrepancies between teachers' and students' value systems. Grades were rarely used in years 3 and 6.

*Usually she puts comments and put the spellings right and puts A1 or B2. A is very good... I can't remember what the number means. (Y9)*

*Sometimes if she just puts B at the bottom and doesn't put corrections - you think, well, what have I got to do to put it right? (Y10)*

*I got B4 - I think it's B for how much effort you've put in and 4 for what you actually put in. (Y10)*

*They use 1 to 4, that's the effort and A to E, that's attainment. Or it might be the other way round. (Y10)*

*That's a 5. I don't know what it means. I've got it on some of my work, I think it's a grade thing. (Y10)*

*Mostly its a grade like A,B,C,D and a comment next to it suggesting improvement. The grade's usually about effort. If you put in a great amount of effort you usually get an A - at least it was lower down the school. (A level)*

### **c) Positive comments:**

These, including ticks, smiley faces and 'good work', were appreciated because they signified approval but were not much help in improving work because they didn't help students 'bridge the gap' between present performance and future goals. Younger students often only had positive comments and appreciated them because they boosted their confidence but higher achievers of all ages wanted to know how their work was assessed and be told more than 'well done'. Some GCSE students felt that teachers didn't pay enough attention to their work and several older higher attaining students felt that class feedback wasn't useful if they'd already done their best and got good comments or grades.

Written comments while appreciated weren't always used. This was either because they couldn't be read (years 3, 6 and 9 in particular), weren't understood or because the students chose not to use

them. Oral feedback was preferred by both students and teachers but in primary schools opportunities have been reduced by government priorities (NC, numeracy, literacy).

*Good doesn't help much - he's just saying that it's not really very good. I like it if he just told the truth. (Y3)*

*I'm proud because the comments are usually good. (Y6)*

*Good or excellent gives you confidence in what you're doing. (Y6)*

*If they give you tips on how you could improve and say what you did well it's a lot nicer. It boosts your confidence more. (Y9)*

*Sometimes they'll say you need to put more facts in, sometimes they'll put 'see me' so you can go and talk to them. They write little comments saying 'that's good'. You can see when you're improving. (Y10)*

*Every time you do something good you get a stamp in your planner and they count them up every month... A gold commendation gets handed out in assembly and you get a 7.50 book token. (Y10)*

*Do you read what the teacher writes? - No, I just keep on writing. (Y10)*

*Sometimes if you do a piece very well and she goes through it in class then there's not much point in listening to it. (A level)*

#### **d) Critical comments:**

These were usually not liked - it makes you feel sad and doesn't help improve work. However others felt that critical comments were helpful if they helped the pupil understand what was required. Comments on effort were sometimes demoralising if they didn't match the pupil's own perception of their effort. There was little evidence of real strategies for improving performance e.g. 'try harder' or 'always stay focused' were not felt to be helpful.

*It was just like someone had shot a bullet saying 'be neater' through my ear and it went up to my brain and I was, like, neat. (Y3)*

*'Not very good work' doesn't help me to know how to do it better. (Y3)*

*Sometimes we decide I will try to get 5/5 for the next test. That helps me try harder. (Y3)*

*Sometimes he says it could be better but if I think I've done it well I just forget about it. (Y9)*

*She says to spend more time on it - that's about it actually. (Y9)*

*'Could do better' - cos it really puts you down. (Y9)*

*They put things like 'not enough effort', 'could be neater', 'copied'. (Y9)*

*Once she said, 'You're not very good at spelling'. I don't really want to hear that because I already know that. (Y10)*

*You only get a comment if the teacher thinks you should have added something. (GNVQ)*

*Comments are useful because you get to know how to improve. Like it says there - 'one too many rhetorical questions'. (A level)*

## **CONCLUSION**

Students' motivation for learning was influenced by a variety of external and internal factors such as their age, the relevance of the course, the clarity of their career ambitions, family and peer expectations and the pressures of assessments. There was evidence that some year groups (year 6, GCSE, and post-16) were more aware of external assessments and that this had an influence on their attitudes to work and learning, however this may be influenced by the timing of the interviews.

Students attributed success in learning to three factors - effort, ability and opportunity to learn. the relative importance of the three varied with maturity and attainment. Younger students and lower

attainers tended to emphasise effort while older students and higher attainers attributed success to a combination of all three.

Most students were dependent on their teachers to guide them in their learning although older students had clearer frameworks for working. Students usually understood the purpose of individual tasks but did not have a clear understanding ('a big picture') of the requirements of their course, even where this had been explicitly outlined by their teacher. An analogy might be to compare the learning during a year or a course with a journey with young children. Most parents will recognise the phrase "are we nearly there?", which usually begins soon after starting the journey. Students of all ages need constant signposting to help them on their journey of learning and there was evidence that many were not receiving this information appropriately.

In terms of the criteria by which work is assessed students appeared to believe that effort and quality were the most important although many were unsure about how their work was assessed. The messages they communicated to us were that teachers were emphasising the importance of skills such as punctuation, spelling and grammar or maths working rather than the less easily defined quality of the content. The influence of the literacy hour in years 3 and 6 was evident with some evidence of students being clearly told to use paragraphs, metaphors etc. In some cases it was clear that teachers did not share the criteria for assessment with the students.

Students lacked confidence in their own ability to judge their performance and were given few opportunities to practise self-assessment skills. Higher attainers appeared to know what was required, and were able to adapt better to varying assessment practice. Lower attainers found it much more difficult to know what was expected, or how to achieve it.

Feedback was valued by most students, particularly oral feedback where confusions could be clarified, but there was evidence that much feedback was either unfocused or of little use in improving work. There were a wide range of forms of feedback used, some of which weren't understood by students. There was confusion about the use of grades for effort and attainment. Focused and specific comments on how to improve work were welcomed by all students. Students confidence was often boosted by positive feedback and they appreciated the value of critical feedback which gave pointers for improvement. Students didn't like comments that were simply critical of their effort and achievement.

The variability of the feedback reported by students and their sometimes confused perceptions of its intention supports Sadler's (1998) view that "it is the quality, not just the quantity of feedback that merits our closest attention."

## RECOMMENDATIONS

### **QCA should consider how best to give advice to teachers on:**

1. Motivating students, particularly those who have low aspirations and self esteem. It is clear that assessment can be a strong motivator for many students and that some teachers link assessment and learning effectively.
2. How to ensure that students clearly understand what is expected and what they are required to learn. The dependency of students on their teachers means that teachers should be aware of the need to signpost the journey and share the criteria for assessment.
  - How to clearly share the pattern and structure of the overall course, the purpose and requirements of individual pieces of work and how they fit into the overall scheme of work. Lower attainers in particular would benefit from a better understanding of the purpose of their work.

- How to ensure that the criteria used to assess work are a) carefully considered and b) shared with students, particularly lower attainers.
- 3. How to develop opportunities for self and peer assessment. How to ensure that the process enables children to engage more effectively with “bridging the gap between present and future performance.” (Sadler, 1998)
- 4. How to improve the quality of feedback to students and how to ensure that their marking is SMART.
  - Teachers should be provided with information about the most effective forms of feedback and marking particularly as the use of effort and attainment grades appeared to confuse many pupils. Black and Wiliam (1998) found research evidence that comments without grades were more beneficial, particularly for lower attaining children.

We strongly recommend that QCA considers funding further research into the relationship between assessment and learning.

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Paul Weeden / Jan Winter  
September 1999



### Appendix 1 INDIVIDUAL QUESTIONNAIRE

Introduce the area of questions e.g. We will be asking questions about your learning, how you know what you should be doing, how you know how well you're doing and what sort of feedback you get about your work.

| <b>Q1. Attitude to school / course (brief starters)</b>  | <b>Response</b> | <b>Notes</b> |
|--|-----------------|--------------|
| What do you think about school (course) ? (possibly follow up group responses)<br>How hard do you think you work ?   |                 | <b>A</b>     |
| What do you think you will do in the future? (when you are your parents' age?)<br>Why did you choose this course (For GCSE / GNVQ /A level)<br>How will your school work help you achieve your aims? |                 | <b>A</b>     |
| How do you organise your time spent on school work?<br>( <i>In and out of school</i> )   |                 | <b>B/C</b>   |
| Do you think you have any problems with your school work?<br>What are they and how do you try to deal with them?   |                 | <b>B/B</b>   |

**Remember to focus on mathematics / English / science where you can**

| <b>Q2 Work done in class (expectations)</b><br>Using a recent piece of <b>marked</b> work explore:  | <b>Response</b> | <b>Notes</b> |
|---|-----------------|--------------|
| What did you do?<br>What did the teacher tell you to do?<br>Did you know what the teacher wanted you to do before you did the work?   |                 | <b>B</b>     |
| Do you know how good this piece of work is? How do you know?<br>Do you always get the mark you think you're going to get ?<br>(Explore what is meant by 'good' or 'bad' work)<br>Are you ever asked to mark / assess your own work ?<br>Do you have to assess how well you've done this week / term |                 | <b>C</b>     |
| How do you feel about the comments/feedback from your teacher?<br>What kind of comments or information do you feel help you improve your work?<br>What kind of comments or information do you feel <b>don't</b> help you improve your work?   |                 | <b>D</b>     |
| Do you have targets for improving your work? How are they set?  |                 | <b>D</b>     |

**Investigate either Q3a tests and exams or Q3b coursework** (it may be appropriate to split the group 3- 3a; 3 - 3b)

Question 3a was quite general with year 3 - could be year 2 SATs, spelling tests)

Remember to focus on mathematics / English / science where you can

| <b>Q3a Tests and exams</b> Discuss attitudes to these, exploring:   | <b>Response</b> | <b>Notes</b> |
|---|-----------------|--------------|
| How do you feel about doing them?<br>What information do you have beforehand?<br>Do you know about the assessment criteria? (word question appropriate to age group / course)<br>What preparation do you do beforehand?<br>What do you feel afterwards? |                 | <b>B</b>     |
| How well do you do?<br>How do you know?   |                 | <b>C</b>     |
| What information do you get back after you have done a test?<br>How do you think you could do better on tests?<br>When you take a test, do you usually know how well you are going to do?<br>How do you know?   |                 | <b>D</b>     |

**Investigate either Q3a tests and exams or Q3b coursework** (it may be appropriate to split the group 3- 3a; 3 - 3b)

Remember to focus on mathematics / English / science where you can

| <b>Q3b Projects / extended pieces of work / coursework</b> Discuss attitudes to these:   | <b>Response</b> | <b>Notes</b> |
|--|-----------------|--------------|
| (Yr. 3/6) Do you do pieces of work which take longer than just one or two lessons?<br>(Others) Do you do pieces of coursework or projects for your course?<br>Can you describe an example?<br>What information do you have beforehand?<br>Do you know about the assessment criteria? (word question appropriate to age group / course)<br>What preparation do you do beforehand? How do you feel about doing them?<br>What do you feel afterwards? |                 | <b>B</b>     |
| How well do you do?<br>How do you know?  |                 | <b>C</b>     |
| What information do you get back after you have done a piece of coursework/<br>How do you think you could do better on pieces of coursework?   |                 | <b>D</b>     |

| <b>Q4 Comparisons of performance</b>  | <b>Response</b> | <b>Notes</b> |
|---|-----------------|--------------|
| Do you think some people do better at their schoolwork than others? <i>Why do they do better?</i>   |                 | <b>B</b>     |
| Can you identify people who are better / worse at their schoolwork than you?<br>How can you tell?<br>Do you ever compare your performance with other pupils?  |                 | <b>C</b>     |
| Do teachers ever compare how well you are doing with other pupils?  |                 | <b>D</b>     |
| <b>Q5: Types of feedback</b>  |                 |              |
| Look at these 5 cards and say which one(s) describe the way you prefer to receive feedback  |                 | <b>D</b>     |
| <b>Q6: Learning styles</b>  |                 |              |
| Look at these 5 cards and say which one(s) you think describe the way <b>you</b> learn best.<br><br>Possibly revisit groupings questions from group interview |                 | <b>A</b>     |

**APPENDIX 2: LEARNING AND ASSESSMENT PROMPT CARDS:**

As part of each interview the following sets of cards were shown (and where necessary read and explained) to pupils and they were asked to choose which represented their view on each subject best. They were able to choose more than one card from each set if they wished.

**On learning:**

- L1 I learn best when I am given a chance to explore and do things
- L2 I learn best when I am given a challenge
- L3 I learn best when the teacher stands in front of the class and tells me things
- L4 I learn best when I start to think about what other people say
- L5 I learn best when the work is at the right level - not too hard or too easy

**On assessment:**

- A1 I like it best when the feedback suggests how I can improve my work
- A2 I like it best when I just get a mark on my work
- A3 I like it best when I just get a comment on my work
- A4 I like it best when I assess my own work
- A5 I like it best when I understand how my work will be assessed

This table shows the percentages of pupils choosing each card in the different age groups interviewed. Columns do not total 100% because many pupils chose more than one card in each category.

| Card chosen | Year 3 | Year 6 | Year 9 | GCSE | GNVQ / A | Overall |
|-------------|--------|--------|--------|------|----------|---------|
| <b>L 1</b>  | 41     | 33     | 62     | 53   | 59       | 48      |
| <b>L 2</b>  | 26     | 13     | 54     | 53   | 53       | 38      |
| <b>L 3</b>  | 33     | 27     | 12     | 27   | 24       | 26      |
| <b>L 4</b>  | 9      | 7      | 12     | 23   | 47       | 16      |
| <b>L 5</b>  | 43     | 50     | 54     | 70   | 29       | 50      |
|             |        |        |        |      |          |         |
| <b>A 1</b>  | 39     | 37     | 62     | 83   | 94       | 58      |
| <b>A 2</b>  | 26     | 23     | 17     | 23   | 12       | 22      |
| <b>A 3</b>  | 33     | 23     | 25     | 30   | 24       | 28      |
| <b>A 4</b>  | 11     | 0      | 12     | 3    | 0        | 6       |
| <b>A 5</b>  | 17     | 23     | 58     | 53   | 76       | 39      |